

1. The Book of Ruth read on Shevuos is a beautiful and inspiring story, instructive to us in many ways. The story itself is fairly simple, and most of us are, or should be, well acquainted with it. The cast of characters is well-known: Boaz, Ruth and Naomi as the major characters, and Orpah, Elimelech, Machlon and Kilion as the minor characters.
2. But there is one personage who makes a brief appearance in this Book whom we may designate as the "Mystery Man". The Bible doesn't even give him a name. He is an anonymous and therefore mysterious character. You recall that Boaz was determined to marry this young widow of his cousin, this Moabite girl Ruth who had embraced Judaism. ~~But in order to~~ Now since Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi owned the land left to them by their husbands, marriage would mean that these lands would be transferred to ~~the~~ new husbands. Let us remember that in those days real estate had more than commercial value - it meant the family inheritance, and sentiment was supported by law in making every attempt to keep property within the family or as close to it as possible. Now while Boaz was a first cousin, there was a nearer relative - the brother of Elimelech who was the father-in-law of her late husband. Before Boaz could marry her and take possession of the family property, he must have the closer relative's consent (this relative is called the GO'EL or redeemer, for he redeems the family's possessions). Boaz therefore met this man, offered him priority in purchasing the lands of father and sons. He seemed willing to do this, regardless of price. But when Boaz told him that he would also have to marry Ruth if he should redeem the land, this GO'EL hesitated, then refused. I can't do it, he said. Boaz was then next in line for the right of redemption, and that he did, and, of course, he married Ruth too and from them, four generations later, came one of the greatest Jews who ever lived, King David.
3. Who is this relative who missed the opportunity of his life? What is his name? We do not know. The Bible does not tell us. It does tell us rather pointedly that it does not want to mention his name. In describing Boaz's calling to him to offer him the chance of redemption, we read VAYOMER: SHRAH, SHVAH POH, PLONI ALMONI - "and he said, come here such a one and sit down". PLONI ALMONI - "such a one". Lawyers might translate "John Doe". Colloquially we might translate those words as "so-and-so", or the entire phrase in slang English would read, "and he said, ~~come~~ hey you, come here and sit down". Translate it however you will, the Torah makes it clear that it has no wish to reveal this man's name. Evidently he doesn't deserve it. He isn't worthy of having his name mentioned as part of Torah.
4. And we may rightly wonder at the harsh condemnation of this person by the Torah. Why did he deserve this enforced anonymity? He was, after all, willing to redeem the land of his dead brother and nephew. But he balked at taking Ruth into the bargain as a package deal and marrying her out of a sense of duty. Well, who wouldn't do just that? Are those grounds for condemnation? As a matter of fact, our Rabbis tried to pry behind this veil of secrecy and they found his true name. It was, they tell us, TOV, which means good. He was a good chap. He showed a general good nature. There was nothing vicious about him. And yet the Torah keeps him as a mystery man, it punishes him by making him a nameless character. He remains only a faint and anonymous shadow in the gallery of sacred history. His name was never made part of eternal Torah. He was deprived of his immortality. He is known only as PLONI ALMONI, "the other fellow", "so-and-so", "the nameless one". A goodly sort of fellow, yet severely punished. Why is that so?
5. Our Sages have only one explanation for that harsh decree. By playing on the word ALMONI of the title PLONI ALMONI, they derive the word ELAIM - mute or dumb - SHE'HAYAH ILAIM B'DIVREI TORAH, he remains without a name because he was mute or dumb, speechless in Torah. He was not a Torah-Jew. Some good qualities, yes, but not a BEN TORAH. When it came to Torah he lost his tongue. He could express himself in every way but a Torah way: ILAIM B'DIVREI TORAH. Had he been a Torah kind of Jew, he would not have sufficed by just being a nice chap and buying another parcel of land. He would have realized that it is sinful to despise and underrate another human being merely because she is a poor, forlorn, friendless stranger. Had he been imbued with Torah he would have reacted with love and charity to the widow and the orphan and the stranger, the non-Jew. [Had he ever bothered to study Torah, as a Jew

should and must, he would have known the elementary principle of MOAVI V'LO MOAVISS, that once this Moabite girl had decided to embrace Judaism from her own free will and with full genuineness and sincerity that she is as thoroughly Jewish as any other Jewess and that one may marry her as one would the daughter of the Chief Rabbi of Israel. But this man was ILEIM BDIVREI TORAH, he was unfeeling in a Torah way, he was out of joints with the spirit of Torah, he was ignorant of its laws and teachings, he had no contact with it. And a man of this sort has no name, insofar as Torah is concerned. He must needs remain PLONI ALMONI - the nameless one. Such a person is unworthy of having his name immortalized in the Book of Eternal Life. His name has no place in Torah.

6. What we mean by "a name" therefore, and what the Torah meant by it, is something infinitely more than the meaningless appellation given to a person by his parents. It refers, rather, to a spiritual identity, it is the symbol of a spiritual personality in contact with the Divine, and hence with the source of all life for all eternity. A name of this kind is not given; it is earned. A name of this sort is not merely registered by some bored clerk in the city records. It is emblazoned in the sacred letters of eternity on the firmament of time. One who is, therefore, ILEIM BDIVREI TORAH, strange to Torah, can never be worthy of such a name. He must remain a PLONI ALMONI.
7. It is told of the famous conqueror, Alexander the Great, that he was inspecting his troops one day and espied one particularly sloppy soldier. He said to him, "soldier, what is your name?" The soldier answered, "Sir, it is Alexander." The great leader was stunned for a moment, then said to him, "well, either change your name or change your behavior." That is what we mean by a name in Torah. It is the behavior, the personality, the soul, and not the empty title that counts.
8. As far as we Jews are concerned as a people, we can be identified in no other way than through Torah. Without we are a nameless mass. [Without Torah there is assimilation, and Israel no longer exists. Our history, like that of other peoples, has in it elements of military ventures, politics, economics. But more than any other people, it is a history of scholarship, of Torah. It was a non-Jew - Mohammed, the founder of Islam - who called us "The People of the Book" - not just books, but "THE Book". It was a non-Jew - the famed economist Thorsten Veblen - who called Jews "eternal wayfarers in the intellectual no-man's land." It was a non-Jew - the Protestant philosopher Paul Tillich - who said that for Christians Jews serve the spiritual purpose of preventing the relapse of Christendom into paganism. It was a non-Jew - the King of Italy - who in 1904 told Theodor Herzl that "sometimes I have Jewish callers who wince perceptibly at the mere mention of the word Jew. That is the sort I do not like. Then I really begin talking about Jews. I have no am only fond of people who have no desire to appear other than they are." The King of Italy was referring to nameless Jews, those who reject the name "Jew", those who are "mute in the words of Torah". For the Jew who is not ILEIM BDIVREI TORAH knows that the function and destiny of our people is to be a "holy nation and kingdom of priests". As a people we have the choice: remain with Torah and be identified with the House of David, be BNEI MLACHIM, princes of the spirit - or become nameless and faceless blurs in the panorama of history; the people of Boaz, or a collection of PLONI ALMONIs.
9. And what holds true for our people as a whole holds true for us as individuals as well. The Kaballah and Hassidism have maintained that the name of every Jew is MERUMAZ BATORAH, hinted at in Torah. Here too they meant "name" as a source of spiritual identification, as an indication of a living, vibrating, pulsating, soulful personality, a religious "somebody". When you are anchored in Torah, then you are anchored in eternity. Then you are not an indistinguishable part of an anonymous mass, but a sacred, individual person.
10. We who are here gathered for Yizkor, for remembering those dearly beloved who have passed on to another world, we should be asking ourselves that terrific question: will we be remembered? How will we be remembered? Or better: will we deserve to be remembered? And we worthy enough to have our names immortalized in and through Torah? Are we or are we not ILMIM BDIVREI TORAH?

9/10/56
MDS

11. O how we try to achieve that "name", that disguise for immortality! We spend a lifetime trying to "make a name for ourselves" with our peers, in our professions and societies. We leave money in our wills not so much out of charitable feelings as much as that we want our names to be engraved in bronze and hewn in stone. And how we forget that peers die, professions change, societies vanish, bronze disintegrates and stone crumbles. Names of that sort are certainly not indestructible monuments. Listen to one poet who bemoans the loss of his name:

"Alone I walked on the ocean strand, / A pearly shell was in my hand;

"I stooped and wrote upon the sand / My name, the year, the day.

"As onward from the spot I passed, / One lingering look behind I cast,

"A wave came rolling high and fast, / And washed my lines away."

The waves of time wash names of this kind away, indeed. Try as we will, if we remain each of us an ILEIM BDIVREI TORAH, unrooted in Judaism, then we remain as well PLONI ALMONI. Is it not better for us to immortalize our names in and through eternal Torah, so that G-d Himself will not know us other than as PLONI ALMONI?

12. There is a custom which we do not practice but which Hassidic congregations do, which throws this entire matter into bold relief. The custom stems from the famous SHLAH HA'KADOSH who recommends that in order SHE'LO YISHAKACH SHMO LE'YOM HA'DIN, that our names not be forgotten on Judgement Day, that we recite a verse from the Bible related to the name at the end of the daily SHMONEH ESREI. There is a Biblical verse for every name. Thus, my own is NACHUM, and the verse I recite is from Isaiah, NACHMU NACHMU AMI YOMAR ELOKEICHEM - console, console My people, says your G-d. My, what that makes of an ordinary name! Even as a child I was terrifically impressed with it - a job, a mission, a destiny: console your fellow men, your fellow Jews! Let any man do that and no matter what his parents called him, G-d knows his name - it is not PLONI ALMONI; it is an eternal verse which will be read and taken to the hearts of men until the end of days.

13. On this Yizkor Day, think back to those you will shortly memorialize: does he or she have a name in Torah - or must you unfortunately refer to PLONI ALMONI - a shadow of a memory about to vanish? How will we be remembered - not by children, not by friends, not by other men at all... but at YOM HA'DIN, on the day of judgement, by G-d Himself? Will we distinguish ourselves with humility, so that our names will become merged with the glorious verse of MICAH: HATZNEIA LECHESH IM HA'SHEM ELOKECHA - walk humbly with thy G-d? Or will we prove ourselves men and women of sincere consideration and kindness and love for others so that our names will be one with V'AHAVTA LEREIACAHA KAMOCHA...? Or will we devote our finest efforts to the betterment of our people and effecting a rapprochement between Jews and their Torah, so that our names will be BNI B'CHORI YISRAEL, Israel is my first-born? Will we delve to the ~~edge~~ limits of our mental capacity into the study of Torah, so that our names will be found in EITZ CHAYIM HI LAMACHAZIKIM BAH, it is a tree of eternal life to those that hold it? Or will we do none of these things, just be TOV, good-natured men and women with no special distinction in Torah, no real anchorage in Jewishness, and find that our lives have been spent in nothingness and that even G-d has no name for us, that we will be just plain PLONI ALMONI?

14. On this Shevuos day when we recall the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the "Mystery Man" of the Book of Ruth calls to us from the dim obscurity in which he has been shrouded: Do not do what I did. Do not be ILEIM BDIVREI TORAH, mute and speechless when it comes to Torah. Do not end your lives in a puff of anonymity. Grasp the Tree of Life which is Torah. Live it. Practice it. Overcome all hardships and express it in every aspect of your life. Do not abandon it or else G-d will abandon you. Jump at this opportunity for immortality. In short: Make a name for yourself - through Torah, and with G-d.

said: fact that you're here today indicates that they left some spirit, that they have a name in ISM, without doubt.

appeal